

FIRST AUSTRALIAN RECORD OF BLACK-CAPPED KINGFISHER (*HALCYON PILEATA*)

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INTRODUCTION

On 3 January 2005 Harold and Josephine Millington captured an oil-soaked kingfisher on their farm at North Burracoppin in the central wheatbelt of Western Australia. The kingfisher was probably present in the garden the day before as Josephine heard a strange call from dense shrubs. The bird had apparently become oil-soaked after trying to either drink or bathe in a large container of sump oil. It was observed hopping across the ground and cocking its tail, and was captured using a long-handled insect net. Attempts were made at cleaning and feeding the bird but it died on 5 January 2005.

Several photographs were taken of the bird both alive and shortly after death and along with the specimen were sent to Pam Masters of Merredin who emailed the Western Australian Museum for help with identification. The frozen specimen was then brought to the Museum on 13 January, cleaned and prepared into a study skin (registered

number A35429) and its identification confirmed as a Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* (Boddaert).

DESCRIPTION OF THE SPECIMEN

Details of the bird are as follows: immature female with ovary 9.9 x 3.6 mm; total length 286mm; weight 66g (with no body fat); exposed culmen 60 mm; entire culmen 71 mm; wing 132 mm; tarsus 15 mm; hind toe and claw 14 mm. Iris dark brown; orbital ring skin dull pinkish; bill dark coral red grading paler and brighter at tip; mouth bright red; legs red; claws black. Crown and sides of head to level of upper cheeks and ear coverts black; broad collar around hind-neck white tinged with buff. Back mantle scapulars, rump and upper tail coverts deep purple blue, with rump and uppertail coverts slightly brighter (the mantle immediately below the nape band toned dusky and the rump/upper-tail coverts area diffusely somewhat brighter blue). Tail similar to upper parts

but with inner webs blackish and with black shafts. Marginal wing coverts cinnamon buff (forming a narrow pale leading edge to the wing, not visible at rest or in flight). Lesser median and inner greater wing coverts black, primary coverts as back etc. Primaries appear dark with large whitish panel, but actual details complex; outermost primary entirely black, except for white basal (c.30%) section of the inner web; white area extends to both webs on remainder and increases to basal (c.80%) on innermost; the outer web of the "white" area is strongly tinted blue (a paler shade, especially towards the base, than on the upperparts) and the section of outer web within the black tip becomes progressively more suffused with the rich blue of the back etc. until on innermost no 'black' is visible on outer web (a paler blue panel formed by the outer webs can sometimes be seen on closed wing). Secondaries and tertiaries mostly purple blue, grading to black on inner webs. Chin, lower cheeks, throat and breast dull white; the lateral breast feathers either tinged or mainly cinnamon buff, most with fine dusky shaft streaks. Central belly a mixture of white and cinnamon brown. Lower belly, flanks, vent and undertail coverts cinnamon brown (a richer shade), deepest on the flanks. Underwing coverts rich cinnamon brown, remainder of underwing blackish except for

large white patch (mirroring that of upperwing in extent). Undertail black. See Figure 1.

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS

The Black-capped Kingfisher breeds in the temperate-subtropical areas of eastern and southern Asia, from Korea and Manchuria through eastern China south to northern Indochina and westwards through southern China, central Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh to the coastal regions of northern and central peninsula India, including Nicobar and Andaman Islands. (Fry *et al.* 1992). The northern populations are strongly migratory, their post breeding range extending south into the tropical zone, although barely extending south of the equator. The southern limit extending to Sri Lanka, Malay Peninsula (including Singapore) where it is relatively common; Sumatra where although fairly common in the north it is far less so in the southern areas; Java where rare; Borneo where relatively common along northern coastal regions, but much rarer to scarce in southern regions; Philippines where uncommon, with most records relating to islands between main archipelago and north-west Borneo; Sulawesi few records from northern areas. Not recorded from Bali or Lesser Sundas. As such, its presence in Australia is all the more remarkable.



Figure 1. Illustration of Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* A35429 showing details of upper and under parts (J.C. Darnell).

DISCUSSION

The Black-capped Kingfisher is essentially an aquatic kingfisher. During the breeding season (April - August) the more northerly populations penetrate well inland utilising fresh water rivers, lakes etc. as well as brackish and coastal saline areas. In the non-breeding period, they are in general more confined to coastal areas (mangrove fringes, creeks and prawn ponds but will still be found along rivers especially where they have wooded banks but also utilise irrigated areas (paddy fields etc.) and occasionally even extending into dry areas. At such times it is normally solitary, aggressively driving off congeners such encounters often accompanied by a sharp rather ringing (fairly rapid) ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki from an otherwise relatively quiet bird. It typically uses an exposed branch or stump etc. as a vantage point, perching in the typical 'kingfisher stance', giving the occasional bob of the head and vertical flick of a tail. If no prey is seen, or if disturbed it flies off, direct, fairly fast and low to another such vantage point, a series of which form its non-breeding territory. They feed on

fish, frogs, crustaceans, aquatic and terrestrial insects etc., most of these being captured on exposed mudbanks and in shallow water pools. The prey is brought back to the vantage point and in typical Kingfisher manner beaten and broken up before being swallowed (usually head first). The black cap, white nape band, purplish blue-black upperparts, rufous buff underparts, red bill and prominent white panel in the primaries (very obvious in flight) are diagnostic.

The weight of the Western Australian specimen 66 g is well under the range 85-88 g of identification in Fry *et al.* (1992), and it had no subcutaneous or body fat indicating that it had burnt up all of its reserves. What is also puzzling is why, after striking the Western Australian coastline with what would appear to be suitable habitat for this species, did it continue into the semi-arid interior?

REFERENCES

FRY, C.H., FRY, K. and HARRIS, A. 1992. *Kingfishers, Bee-eaters and Rollers*. Christopher Helm, London.